Perspectives on the Qur'an: Negotiating Different Views of a Shared History

Directors: Angelika Neuwirth (Freie Universität Berlin) and Stefan Wild (Universität Bonn)
Members: (Islam Dayeh, Michael Marx, Nicolai Sinai, Ghassan El-Masri)

Introduction

While Western research sees itself as indiscriminately subjecting the Qur'an to the same methods of historical-critical scrutiny that it routinely applies to the Bible as well, Muslim scholars have often complained and still complain about what they perceive as Orientalist attempts to undermine the Qur'an's position of religious authority within the Islamic community. This accusation is in part fuelled by the openly depreciating tone of voice prevalent in some nineteenth-century qur'anic scholarship. Non-Muslim scholars who deal with a subject as sensitive as the Qur'an will have to take these attitudes into account; they certainly must not forego well-established techniques of philological study out of an irenic desire to minimize intercultural conflict, but they will have to put more effort into explaining convincingly why precisely they do what they are doing - and to critically examine the assumptions and motives of the scholarly traditions in which they stand.

Yet the Qur'an is not only the paradigmatic example of a text seen from divergent and frequently incompatible points of view. While it constitutes the foundational text of Islam, it also intimately engages with the religious heritage of Late Antiquity and thus forms an important part of what is generally referred to as 'Western' history. In fact, in spite of the apparent incompatibility of Islamic and non-Islamic perspectives on the Qur'an, the desideratum of initiating an interaction between qur'anic scholars of different religious and cultural backgrounds does not appear altogether hopeless. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, for example, who has been an important participant in recent activities of the AKMI, has put forward an hermeneutical argument for the historical contextualization of the text: Every linguistic utterance, including divine revelations, must adapt itself to the cultural horizon of its audience to be intelligible at all; later readings of these texts must therefore be based on an understanding of their historical milieu of origin. At the same time, a group of Tunisian scholars including Abdalmajid Charfi (Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg in 1999/2000) is working on a new commentary on the Qur'an that will be partially based on unpublished manuscripts, while an Arabic translation of Theodor Nöldeke's Geschichte des Qorans - a three-volume milestone of Western qur'anic scholarship - supervised by George Tamer (AKMI fellow in 2002/3) attracted broad interest at the last Beirut book fair. In fact, if Islamic approaches to the Qur'an are not monolithic, neither is Western scholarship. It can be argued, for example, that the deepening gap between Western and Islamic Qur'an scholarship is not the result of the application, but rather of the abandonment of historical-critical methods of study in the wake of a hyperbolic scepticism that has by now become fashionable in the field of early Islamic history (associated above all with the work of John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, and Michael Cook).

Developments such as these provide for a real possibility of overcoming the mutual indifference and antagonism of qur'anic studies conducted in the West and in the Middle East. Even if complete agreement on a shared paradigm of research does not appear to be a

realistic expectation, the interaction of differing and even rivaling approaches would certainly give rise to important methodological impulses and to a more refined understanding of the qur'anic text itself. The project "Perspectives on the Qur'an" hopes to establish such a discursive forum, which existing academic structures would hardly be able to accommodate. The project will be subdivided into three complementary fields, all of which tie in with each other in important ways. Their material basis will be the ongoing research of the participating scholars, a series of workshops (including a summer academy) dedicated to the topics outlined below, and a number of postdoctoral scholarships for young researchers with different methodological backgrounds.

Toward a literary phenomenology of qur'anic discourse

Spearheaded by Brevard Childs, Biblical Studies have recently seen a move away from tradition and redaction history toward a growing interest in the final version of the biblical text as it has become canonical in the Christian Church. A similarly 'synchronic' approach to the Qur'an has been advocated by Daniel Madigan, among others. Concern for exploring the semantic possibilities inherent in the final version of the Qur'an must by no means be seen as excluding interest in its prehistory, such as processes of textual growth and revision. However, since it is the Qur'an in its present shape that the early Islamic community has accepted as its foundational text, the study of this final version's literary and theological characteristics undeniably constitutes a vital objective. It is this area of research to which the first research field of the outlined project will be dedicated. Its aim will be to arrive at a more profound understanding of three essential characteristics of the Qur'an: its mantic quality, its self-referentiality, and its polyphony.

Not only is the Qur'an accepted by Muslims as divine revelation, it also displays a sustained effort at presenting itself as such through a wide variety of literary devices. To take up a definition of Nora Chadwick, one may say that the Qur'an is marked as mantic speech, i.e., as a speech form recognized by speaker and listener to emanate from a supra-natural realm. "Out of the speaker's mouth comes the voice of a possessing demon, revealing god, or inspiring muse", and human discourse thus becomes prophecy, inspiration, oracle, poetry, and many other things. In pre-Islamic Arabia, mantic discourse was a well-known phenomenon. It was characterized by structured units of speech, by rhyme or assonance, and by a supra-tribal form of Arabic distinct from everyday speech. Yet with the recitations uttered by Muhammad, which were later collected in the Qur'an, mantic speech gained a completely new dimension in Arabia. Radically new features were that the Qur'an ascribed its own mantic discourse to the revelation of one God who had also been the God of earlier monotheist revelations. This ascription is linguistically expressed by mantic markers, which constantly reminded the listener that this recitation was above all a discourse coming from outside the Prophet.

The most important mantic marker in the Qur'an is the use of the first person when the mantic voice refers to itself as "I" or "We", which clearly is not meant to refer to the Prophet Muhammad. A second mantic marker is the imperative "say", which occurs more than 300 times in the Qur'an and identifies the words following it as direct supra-human speech. Frequently, it is inserted in a dialogue between the Prophet and his listeners, e.g. when the Prophet is addressed with the words "When they ask thee about X, then say...". Traditionally, 19th century Western scholarship has considered Muhammad not only to have promulgated the Qur'an, but also to be its author, while remaining divided over whether his claim to be the recipient of divine revelations must be explained in terms of an intentional fraud or accepted as 'subjectively', albeit not objectively, 'truthful'. The present project will consciously eschew the debate over whether the qur'anic employment of mantic markers

reflects 'real' revelation or not and focus instead on providing a more refined phenomenology of literary devices than has hitherto been put forward.

An essential aspect of mantic speech is the fact that it is primarily speech. Mantic speech is more than just spoken, it is performed. In extreme cases, it may be accompanied by ecstatic or trance-like conditions: the speaker becomes an agent or an actor. The effect of recitation is mentioned in 39:23: "…whereat shiver the skins of those who fear their Lord; then their skins and their hearts soften to the remembrance of God" and 5:83 "and when they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, thou seest their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth they recognize". Numerous peculiarities of the Qur'an's literary configuration can only be understood as phenomena related to its oral performance and aural reception (dialogues in the Qur'an, ruptures such as sudden changes of narrative voices, repetitions, etc.). Mantic speech is accompanied by gestures and change of voices, and is above all characterized by interaction with the listeners (applause, agreement, contradiction, heckling, questions, answers, irony). A few remnants of these features are still audible in contemporary recitation and some are still discernible in the written text; they may thus partly be reconstructed via a careful analysis of the qur'anic text itself and reports on the early reception of Qur'anic recitation. The phenomenological approach set out in the last paragraph thus needs to be supplemented with an attempt to reconstruct the performative setting within which the qur'anic revelations were first promulgated and then taken up as devotional recitations by the early Islamic community.

The mantic quality of the qur'anic recitations is also at the root of another important, yet surprisingly understudied feature of the text, namely its self-referentiality. Mantic speech being reported speech, it always carries an element of self-reflexivity: it is as much itself as about itself. The Qur'an informs its listeners (and later, the textual version of this recitation informs the readers) in which language it is, when and how it was revealed, and why it was revealed in steps and fragments and not as a whole. It defines the difference between itself and other modes of mantic speech. It establishes the relation between Jewish and Christian scripture and itself. Recited passages tell the Prophet how he should recite them and what to do and what not to do when he is in the process of reciting them. Qur'anic recitations discuss clear and ambiguous verses, changed and forgotten verses; they comfort the Prophet when he is close to despairing of the success of his message and upbraid and even threaten him when he is remiss. A crucial starting point for the study of the Qur'an's self-referentiality will be to scrutinize the different names used by the mantic voice to refer to its message and to different aspects, functions, and parts of it: qur'an (recitation), kitab (writing, book), dhikr (remembrance; recollection), naba' (news), bushra (glad tidings), indhar (warning), tanzil (sending down, revelation), wahy (revelation), maw'iza (admonition), hukm (judgment), sura (passage, chapter), aya (verse), qasas (narrative), etc.

Finally, the Qur'an not only employs a variety of literary devices in order to present itself as divine speech, but also admits other speakers and listeners into its discourse: Various groups of opponents and followers ("O you who believe", "O people", "O angels", "O foolish ones", "O unbelievers", "O children of Israel") are cited and

addressed besides the Prophet himself, while the mantic speaker may refer to himself as "I", "We", "Thy lord" (when the Prophet is addressed), "Your lord" (when a group of listeners is addressed), "He", "God" (allah), "the Merciful" (ar-rahman), etc. The Qur'an thus enshrines a multitude of different voices that are related to different modes of speech (debate, polemics, paraenesis, eschatological threats, narration, etc.). Neal Robinson, in his study Discovering the Qur'an. A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text, Washington D.C. 1996, has taken an important first step to unravel these voices, yet much more remains to be done.

An indispensable inspiration for these research questions has been Prof. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. It is hoped that the largely phenomenological approach pursued here will prove particularly attractive to young scholars from Muslim countries willing to be exposed to different hermeneutical approaches without compromising their chances of being re-employed in their countries of origin.

September 2006